NALINI SINGH

Author photo by Ashwini Singh

Angels' Pawn

A Companion Novella to
Angels' Blood

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Angels' Pawn
(The book that inspired the Guild Hunter series)
A Novella by Nalini Singh

Chapter One

"This is a surprise, *cher*," Janvier said in that lazy drawl of his, one hand braced on the doorjamb of his Louisiana apartment. "Far as I know, I don't have a hit out on me."

"I'm not an assassin." Folding her arms, Ashwini leaned into the wall opposite the door—sleep-rumpled and half-dressed, Janvier was deliciously sexy. He was also a two-hundred-and-forty-five-year-old vampire capable of ripping out her throat with minimal effort. "Though it might come in handy with you."

A slow smile crept over that face that was a little too long, a little too saturnine for true beauty. And yet . . . Janvier was the man every woman in a bar would turn to look at, his appeal as rawly earthy as the unhidden interest in eyes the shade of bayou moss, all sunlight and shadows over green. "You wound me. I thought we were friends, *non*?"

"*Non.*" She raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to let me in?"

He shrugged, the muscles of his chest rippling with a strength most people would never guess at from the way he moved, pure liquid grace and charm. But Ashwini knew exactly how fast and tough he was—she'd hunted him three times in the past two years, and he'd led her on a merry dance all three times.

"Depends," he said, taking a leisurely survey of her body. "You here to beat up on me again?"

"Eyes up."

Laughter in that wicked gaze as it met hers. "You're no fun, sugar."

Only with Janvier did she end up the practical side of the unit. Everyone else thought she was way over on the east side of crazy. "This was a bad idea." Turning on her heel, she flicked a hand his way. "See you the next time you piss off an angel." In the normal run of things, the Guild existed to retrieve those vampires who broke their Contracts—to serve the angels for a hundred years in exchange for immortality—and then there was Janvier . . . "Try not to do it this week. I'm busy."

His hand closed over the back of her neck, a warm, oddly gentle touch. "Don't be like that, now. Come in. I'll make you coffee the way it's meant to be made."

She should have pulled away, should have gone as far as humanly possible. But Janvier had a way of getting under her skin. She hesitated a fraction too long, and the heat of him seeped into her, a vivid bright thing that defied the ice of his immortality. "No touching." It was as much an order to herself as to him.

A squeeze of his fingers. “You’re the one who’s always trying to get her hands on me.”

“And one of these days, you won’t dance fast enough to escape.” Janvier had the habit of annoying angels enough to end up on the Guild’s hunt list. But that wasn’t the worst part—right when Ashwini *almost* had him, when she could all but smell the collar, he’d somehow make up with whoever it was he’d offended. Last time, she’d nearly shot him on principle.

A brush of laughter, his thumb sweeping along her skin in a languid caress. “You should thank me,” he said. “Because of me, you’re guaranteed a healthy pay packet at least twice a year.”

“I’m guaranteed that pay packet because I’m good,” she said, twisting out of his hold so she could face him. “You ready to talk?”

He swept out an arm. “Step into my lair, Guild Hunter.”

Ashwini wasn’t much for allowing vampires at her back, but she and Janvier had an understanding after three hunts. If it ever came down to it, it would be face-to-face. Some of her hunter brethren might call her a fool for trusting a man she had hunted, but she’d always made up her own mind about people. She had no illusions, knew Janvier could be as lethal as an unsheathed blade, but she also knew he’d been born in a time when a man’s word was all he had. Immortality hadn’t yet stolen that sense of honor from him.

Now she squeezed past him, aware he’d deliberately turned his body to ensure a tight fit. She didn’t mind as much as she should have. That was the problem—because vampires were off-limits. The Guild had no rule forbidding such relationships and a number of her hunter friends had vampire lovers, but Ashwini agreed with fellow hunter Elena on this. The other woman had once said that vampires were almost-immortals, after all—to them, humans were nothing but toys, fleeting pleasures, easily tasted, easily forgotten.

Ashwini wasn’t going to be a snack for any man—vampire, human, or angel. Not that the angels would ever lower themselves enough to consort with a mortal. She’d be very surprised if the effective rulers of the world considered most humans as anything but an afterthought.

“Not what I expected,” she said, walking into the stylish converted loft. Light dominated and had been infused into the décor—the colors of sunset echoed in the bright throws that lay over the earth-toned sofa, the Navajo rugs on the floor, the lonely desert vistas painted on the walls.

“I love the bayou,” Janvier murmured, closing the door behind him and padding over to the kitchen area, “but to appreciate beauty, one must sometimes go to the opposite extreme.”

As he moved about the kitchen with the ease of a man who knew

exactly what he was doing, Ashwini allowed herself to admire the male beauty of him. Janvier might be a perennial pain in her ass, but he was built like the sexiest dream she'd ever had—lean and long, his muscles that of a runner or a swimmer, all sleek lines and contained power. At six feet three, he topped her by a good five inches, carrying the height with the confidence of a man completely at ease with himself.

Then again, she thought, he'd had over two hundred years to build that effortless arrogance. "I'm guessing you're not bothered by sunlight," she said, checking out the sloping skylight to the right. The bed was right below it—and as the clock ticked over eight in the morning, the sun's rays stroked possessively over the tumbled sheets.

Her mind immediately supplied her with an exquisitely detailed image of Janvier's long-limbed body tangled up in those sheets. The rush of blood in her ears almost drowned out his next words.

"Looking for weaknesses, hunter?" Walking over, he handed her a small cup filled with a creamy brew that smelled like no coffee she'd ever had.

"What is this?" She took a suspicious sniff, felt her mouth water. "And of course. Then I could just push you into sunlight and watch you fry."

His lips quirked up, the upper one a little thin, the lower eminently bitable. "You'd miss me if I was gone."

"Old age is giving you delusions."

"That is café au lait made with a blend of coffee and chicory." Watching as she chanced a sip, he nodded to the bed. "I love sunlight. Vampirism wouldn't have been the least attractive if I'd had to spend my life in the dark."

"You'd think with all the vampires walking around in daylight, that old rumor would die, but no, it keeps on chugging," she said, soaking in the distinctive flavor of the coffee. "I like this stuff."

"It suits you."

"Bitter and strange?"

"Exotic and luscious." He ran a finger down the bared skin of her arm. "Such beautiful skin you have, *cher*. Like the desert at sunset."

She stepped out of reach. "Go put on a shirt and get your mind out of bed."

"Impossible with you around."

"Pretend I'm holding a rifle. In fact, pretend I have you in the crosshairs."

Janvier sighed, rubbing at a jaw shadowed by morning stubble. "I love it when you talk dirty."

"Then this should rock your world," she said, ordering herself to stop thinking about what that stubble would feel like against her skin.

“Blood, kidnapping, feud, hostage.”

Interest sparked in the moss green. “Tell me more.” He waved her toward the bed. “I apologize for the mess—I wasn’t expecting such exquisite company.”

Walking over to put her coffee on the counter, she hitched herself up on one of the bar stools instead. Janvier grinned and chose to sit on the bed, hands braced behind him, jean-clad legs crossed loosely at the ankles. Sunlight danced over his dark brown hair, picking up glints of pure copper that played beautifully against the burnished gold of his skin.

Vampires as old as Janvier were almost uniformly pretty, but she’d yet to meet one with the Cajun’s charisma—or his way of having friends in pretty much every city and town he’d ever traveled to. And that was why she needed him. “There’s a situation in Atlanta.”

“Atlanta?” The barest of pauses. “That’s Beaumont territory.”

Bingo. “How well do you know them?”

He gave her that loose-limbed shrug of his. “Well enough. They’re an old vampire family—not many of those around.”

Seduced by the scent, Ashwini took another sip of Janvier’s potent brand of coffee. “Makes sense. I heard the angels don’t discriminate along familial lines when it comes to choosing Candidates.” Of the many hundreds of thousands who applied to be Made almost-immortal every year, only a tiny fraction ever reached the Candidate stage.

“The Beaumonts buck the curve,” Janvier continued. “They’ve managed to get at least one family member Made in every generation. This time, it was two.”

“Monique and Frédéric. Brother and sister.”

A nod. “That kind of success makes them a powerhouse—with Monique and Frédéric, the Beaumonts now have ten living vampires connected by blood. The oldest is half a millennium old.”

“Antoine Beaumont.”

“Cutthroat bastard,” Janvier said in an almost affectionate tone. “Would probably sell his own children upriver if he thought he could profit from it.”

“A friend?”

“I saved his life once.” Lifting his face to the sun, Janvier soaked in the rays like some sybarite on a European coast far from the humid, earthy embrace of a Louisiana summer. “He sends me a bottle of his best Bordeaux every year—along with a proposal that I should consider marrying his daughter Jean.” Pronounced in the French way, the name sounded sensual and electric.

Her fingers tightened on the hand-painted coffee cup. “Poor woman.”

He turned his face back to her, devilment in his eyes. “On the contrary, Jean is quite keen on the match. Last winter, she invited me to keep her warm in a most beautiful cabin in Aspen.”

Ashwini knew when she was being played. She also knew Janvier was fully capable of spinning a tale to keep her there—purely for his own amusement. “I can bet you Jean isn’t thinking of Aspen right now. In fact, it’s a good bet she’s thinking only of murder.”

“The situation?” And there was that quicksilver intelligence again, the thing that kept drawing her back to him in spite of her every vow to the contrary.

“Monique is what, Jean’s great-granddaughter times nine?”

Janvier took a moment to think about it. “Perhaps ten, but it matters little. Jean dotes on the child. Antoine calls both Monique and Frédéric his grandchildren.”

“The woman’s twenty-six,” she pointed out, “hardly a child. And her brother’s thirty.”

“Everyone under a hundred is a child to me.”

“Funny.”

“I do not talk of you, *cherie*.” His smile slid away to expose a darker edge, one that had seen centuries pass. “You carry too much knowledge in your eyes. If I did not know you were human, I’d think you, too, had lived as long as I.”

Sometimes, she felt as if she had. But the demons that clawed into her mind night and day had no place in this discussion. Breaking Janvier’s too-perceptive gaze, she said, “Monique’s been kidnapped.”

“Who’d dare rise against the Beaumonts?” Open shock. “Not only are they a power in their own right, but the angel who controls Atlanta holds them in high favor.”

“He did,” she said, turning her eyes back to him, enjoying the play of sunlight on his body. It was a simple pleasure with a potent kick—even the demons couldn’t hold up against the sensual temptation that lapped against her senses. “But seems like your buddy Antoine’s managed to piss Nazarach off.”

Janvier rose to his feet, brow furrowed. “But even so, to take on Antoine is to slit your own throat.”

“The Fox kiss doesn’t think so.”

“A kiss?” Shaking his head, he walked to stand in front of her, one hand braced on the counter. “You’re speaking in the truest sense of the word—a group of vampires banding together for a common purpose?”

“Yep.”

“I haven’t heard of a formal kiss of vampires for over a century.”

“Some guy named Callan Fox apparently decided to revive the idea.” Curious, compelled, she ran her fingers along a curving scar on

Janvier's chest, just above his left nipple. "I didn't give you this."

"If only," he murmured, playing along. "I would be honored to carry your marks."

"Too bad vampires heal so quickly." She found herself tracing the scar, seeing something familiar in it. But unlike with every other person she knew, there was no pulse of memory, no unwanted invasion into her mind as her gift, her curse, pulled her into Janvier's past. Instead of seeing his secrets, knowing his nightmares, all she felt was warm, silken skin, a little imperfect, and all the more intriguing for it.

"A knife," she said. "Was this made by a knife?"

"Of a kind—a sword." Closing his fingers over her wrist, he brought her hand to his mouth, pressing lingering kisses along the knuckles. "Will you tease me this way forever, Ashwini?"

Chapter Two

"Only a few more decades," she said, feeling her stomach tense, her toes curl. "Then it'll be time for a new hunter to chase you."

She expected some amusing comeback, but Janvier's face grew still, so very, very still. "Do not speak of your death with such ease."

"Since I'm not about to sign a Contract giving over a hundred years of my almost-immortal life," she said, one hand remaining pressed against him, the other in his grasp, "death is a certainty."

"Nothing is certain." He released her hand to tug at strands of her unbound hair, eyes warming from within. "But we'll discuss your humanity another time. I find myself intrigued by the idea of this Fox kiss."

Reaching into her back pocket, she brought out the nifty PDA that Ransom, another of the hunters working out of the New York Guild, had given her as a Christmas present. "This is Callan Fox." She flicked to a picture of the tall, heavily muscled blond. "According to my info, he turned two hundred this year."

"I recognize that face." A frown, as if he was sifting through layers of memory. "Now I remember—I met him in Nazarach's court when he was serving out his Contract. The other vampires in the court misjudged him then, thought him slow."

"And you?"

Fingers trailing up her arm, playful and light. "I saw an almost brutal intelligence, coupled with ambition. It doesn't surprise me that Callan has managed to put together a kiss and at such a young age. Do the other vampires in the group look to their founder for leadership?"

"Seems that way. Funny thing is, there are at least a couple of three-hundred-year-old vamps in the kiss, and one who might be approaching the four-century mark."

"Not all vampires gain power with age." Putting one foot on the outside of her stool, he flicked through the photos of the other vampires in the kiss. "Look at me. I'm still as weak as a babe."

"Does that line ever work?" She took back her precious gadget when he started to go into her personal albums.

A slashing smile. "You'd be surprised at how many women just love to console poor, desolate me. Who's the boy in that photo?"

Her heart twisted. That boy was now a man, a man who refused to see her as anyone but the mirage she'd once been. "None of your business."

"Such pain." Janvier's fingers stopped for a second, before his hand curved over her upper arm. "How can you breathe past it, *cher*?"

Because when there was no other option, the mind learned to

compensate . . . even if it could never forget. “You want to know more about this op or not?”

“One day,” Janvier said, shifting until the heat of him touched her in an aggressive masculine caress, “I will know your secrets.”

Part of her wanted to lean in, to be held. But that part was buried so deep, even she wasn’t sure if it would ever see the light. “Then you’d be bored.” Pushing at that chest that tempted her to jump straight into madness, she hopped off the stool. “Guild’s been hired by Nazarach.”

That got Janvier’s interest. “Angels usually let high-level vamps sort out their own feuds.”

“I have a meet with him tomorrow morning.” She moved aside the leg he’d braced on her stool, the muscle of his thigh flexing with strength. “Guess I’ll find out his motives then.”

All trace of charm left Janvier’s face, exposing the almost feral ruthlessness of his true self. “You will not go to him alone.” It was an order.

Intrigued—Janvier never used force when he could as easily persuade—she put one hand on her hip. “I know his rep.” Going into a hunt blind was just asking for death. Especially when it involved an angel who inspired as much whispered terror as Nazarach. “I’m not his type.”

“You’re wrong. Nazarach has always collected the unique and unattainable.” Stepping back, he walked to the wardrobe, the line of his back sleek with muscle. “Give me a moment to dress and pack.”

“I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“If you walk out of here alone, I’ll simply follow you.” Steel in those moss and shadow eyes. “Much easier to take me along.”

She shrugged. “You want to waste your time, that’s up to you.”

A pause as he studied her, cool intelligence rising past the hot burn of temper. “You intended to take me along all the time,” he said at last. “Now you try to play me. Shame on you, Ashwini.”

How the hell did he read her that way? “Guild says this is touchy,” she admitted. “I figured the fact that you know the players would provide a nice noncombative entrée into their world.”

“So you will use me.” Pulling on a white T-shirt, he covered up that body her fingers wanted to stroke, wanted to know, safe in the knowledge that it would only be Janvier under her fingertips, no ghosts, no echoes, nothing but the beautiful, infuriating vampire himself. “Perhaps I’ll ask you for recompense.”

“Half my fee.” Fair was fair—it’d be much faster and easier to get to Callan Fox with Janvier by her side.

“I don’t need money, *cher*.” Pulling out a duffel, he began to pack with almost military efficiency. “If I do this, you will owe me a favor.”

"Not to hunt you?" She shook her head at once. "I can't promise that. The Guild would have my badge."

He waved off her words with that wicked, wicked smile he seemed to save just for her. "*Non*, this favor will be between Ashwini and Janvier, no one else. It will be personal."

The sensible thing would've been to walk away . . . but then she'd never been big on sensible. "Deal."

Nazarach ran Atlanta from a gracious old plantation house that had been converted for angelic inhabitants. "Very Southern," Ashwini said as the limo glided down the drive. "Must admit, it's not quite what I expected."

Janvier stretched out his long legs as much as he could. "You're used to Archangel Tower."

"Hard not to be. It dominates Manhattan." Raphael's Tower, the place from which the archangel effectively ruled North America, had become as much a symbol of New York as the ubiquitous red apple. "Have you ever seen it at night? It's like a knife of light, cutting through the sky." Beauty and cruelty intertwined.

"Once or twice," Janvier said. "I've never been close to Raphael, though. You?"

She shook her head. "I hear he's one scary s.o.b."

The vampire driving them met her eyes in the rearview mirror. "That's putting it mildly."

Janvier leaned forward, his interest buzzing along her skin. "You've met the archangel?"

"He came to Atlanta for a meeting with my sire six months ago." Ashwini saw goose bumps rise over the vampire's skin. "I thought I knew what power felt like. I was wrong."

Hearing that from a vampire who was no newborn made Ashwini damn glad she was "only" dealing with a midlevel angel. "Huge windows that open out into nothing," she said, caught again by the timeless elegance of the plantation house as it came into focus. "Easy to fall out of one."

Janvier put his arm around the back of the seat. "Angels can fly."

"*Janvier.*"

A chuckle, fingers stroking across her hair as he removed his hand. "Would you like to fly?"

She thought of her dreams, that sensation of falling endlessly, caught in a whirlwind of nightmare. "No. I like my feet set firmly on the ground."

"You surprise me, *cher*. I know how much you like jumping off bridges."

"I'm attached to a bungee cord at the time."

"Ah, far safer then."

The car came to a stop before she could return the amused volley, and they stepped out into Atlanta's lush embrace. "Would you?" she asked, glancing at him all loose-limbed and roughly sexy beside her as they walked to the front door. "Like to fly?"

"I'm bayou born. One of the first after my people came to Louisiana." He slid his hands into his pockets, his voice holding the music of his home. "It's water that's in my blood, not air."

"The hunter-born hate water." It was no secret—not for a vampire as experienced as Janvier.

"But you're not one of the bloodhounds," Janvier pointed out. "Water doesn't mask a vampire's scent for you—you're a tracker. You rely on your eyes."

"Trackers hate water, too." A snarl directed squarely at him. "It destroys the trail."

"Hey, now," he said, still in that easy, unhurried voice, "I took you through the bayou, sugar. Lots of damp earth—plenty of signs for a tracker to follow."

"I had mold growing in my toes by the end of that hunt."

"Now I find myself envious of mold—see what you do to me." Teasing words, a gaze that stroked her with fire.

"You ever make me hunt you in that kind of damp again," she said, feeling her stomach give a little twinge as his eyes moved over her, proprietary in a way they had no right to be, "I'll make you eat the bloody mold."

Janvier was still laughing as they walked up the final steps to find the door being held open by a small, wrinkled woman who was unquestionably human. Even if Ashwini hadn't noticed the myriad other signs that proclaimed her mortality, the simple fact was the angels only accepted Candidates between the ages of twenty-five and forty. And once Made, a vampire was frozen in time—except, of course, for the gradual polish of a beauty no mortal would ever possess.

But there was another kind of beauty in this woman's face, marked as it was by the experiences of a life lived to the fullest. A life still being lived that way, Ashwini thought, as she watched those bright blue eyes take in Janvier with a definite glint of female appreciation—one that didn't dim as she invited them inside. "The master is waiting for you in the living area."

"Will you show us the way, darlin'?"

The woman dimpled. "Of course. Please follow me." As they walked behind the older woman, Ashwini jabbed Janvier with her elbow. "Do you have no shame?"

"None whatsoever."

An instant later they were being shown through doors large

enough to accommodate an angel's wings. The maid whispered away after letting them in, and while Ashwini's hunter senses would never let her ignore the woman's exit, it occupied only a very small part of her mind. Because Nazarach was waiting for them.

And if he was only a midlevel angel, then she was damn grateful she'd never been, and likely never would be, in the presence of an archangel.

The Atlantan angel was about Janvier's height, with gleaming black skin and eyes of such a direct, piercing amber, it was as if they were lit from within. That illusion of light was power, of course, the power of an immortal. The incredible force of it lay like a shimmering film in his eyes, on his skin, and most magnificently, on his wings.

"You like my wings," the angel said, and his voice was deep, holding a thousand voices she tried not to hear, tried not to know.

"It'd be impossible to do otherwise." She held those ghostly voices at bay with a will honed by a lifetime of fighting for her sanity. "They're beyond beauty." A burnished amber, Nazarach's wings were not only unique, but so exquisitely formed, each feather so perfect, her mind had trouble accepting they existed. When he flew, she thought, he'd look like a blinding piece of the sun.

Nazarach gave her a small smile, and perhaps there was warmth in it, but it was nothing human, nothing mortal. "As it is impossible to do anything but appreciate you, Guild Hunter."

The tiny hairs at the back of her neck stood up in screaming warning. "I'm here to do a job and I'll do it well. If you want to play games, I'm not your girl."

Janvier stepped forward before Nazarach could reply to what was surely a highly impertinent statement. "Ashblade," he said, using the nickname he was responsible for coining, "is good at what she does. She's not so good at playing by the rules."

"So"—Nazarach turned his attention to Janvier—"you're not dead yet, Cajun?"

"Despite Ash's best attempts."

The angel laughed, and the shattering power of it swept around the room, crawled over her skin. Age, death, ecstasy, and agony, it was all in that laugh, in Nazarach's past. It crushed her, threatened to cut off her breath, leaving her trapped forever in the terror-choked hell that had sought to claim her since childhood.

Chapter Three

It was the fear that saved her. Fueled by the threat of being imprisoned inside her own mind, she wrenched herself out of the endless whirlpool and back into the present. As the rush of air receded from her ears, she heard Nazarach say, “Perhaps I’ll ask you to rejoin my court, Janvier.”

Janvier gave a perfect bow, and for an instant, she saw him in the clothes of a bygone era, a stranger who knew how to play politics with as much manipulative ease as he played cards. Her hand fisted in instinctive rejection, but the next moment he laughed that lazy, amused laugh, and he was the vampire she knew again. “I never was much good as a courtier if you recall.”

“But you provided the most intelligent conversation in the room.” Settling his wings close to his back, the angel walked to a gleaming mahogany table in one corner. “You aid the Guild Hunter?”

Ashwini let Janvier speak, using the time to study Nazarach, his power snapping a whip against her senses . . . a whip laced with broken glass.

“The idea of a kiss arouses my curiosity.” Janvier paused. “If I may—this situation between Antoine and Callan seems beneath your interest.”

“Antoine,” Nazarach said, his face turning expressionless in the way of the truly old ones, “has begun to overreach himself. He has come dangerously close to challenging my authority.”

“He’s changed, then.” Janvier shook his head. “The Antoine I knew was ambitious, but he also had a healthy regard for his own life.”

“It is the woman—Simone.” The angel passed a photograph to Ashwini, eyes of inhuman amber lingering on her own face a fraction too long. “Barely into her third century and yet she twists Antoine around her finger.”

“Why isn’t she dead?” Ashwini asked point-blank. Angels were a law unto themselves. There was no court on earth that would hold Nazarach to account if he decided to eliminate one of the Made.

Vampires chose their masters when they chose immortality.

The angel flared out his wings slightly, then snapped them shut. “It seems Antoine loves her.”

Ashwini nodded. “You kill her, he’ll turn against you.” And he’d die. Angels were not known for their benevolence.

“After being alive for seven hundred years,” Nazarach mused, speaking of centuries as if they were mere decades, “I find I’m loath to lose one of the few men—his recent mistakes aside—I actually

respect."

Returning the photo of the sultry brunette who was apparently making a very old vampire dance to her tune, Ashwini forced herself to meet Nazarach's gaze—the amber acted as a lens, focusing the screams to piercing clarity. "How does this tie in with the kidnapping?" she asked, blocking the nightmare with everything she had.

"Callan Fox," Nazarach said, "intrigues me. I don't want him dead yet. And Antoine will kill the young pup to retrieve his granddaughter. Get Monique out and bring her to me."

"You're asking us to hand you a hostage to use against Antoine." Ashwini shook her head, relief a cool brush down her spine. "The Guild doesn't get involved in political disputes."

"Between angels," Nazarach corrected. "This is a . . . problem between an angel and the vampires under his control."

"Even so," she said, unable to stop her eyes from going to those wings of amber and light, unable to understand how such beauty could exist alongside the inhuman darkness that stained Nazarach from within, "if you want Monique, all you have to do is ask. Callan will hand her over." The leader of the Fox kiss might be willing to take on Antoine Beaumont, but only a very stupid vampire would stand against an angel. And Callan Fox was not stupid. "You don't need me."

Nazarach gave her an inscrutable smile. "You will not mention my name to Callan. As for the rest—the Guild has already agreed to the terms."

"No offense," she said, wondering if he'd look as brutally beautiful while he choked the life out of those who displeased him, "but I need to check that with my boss."

"Go ahead, Guild Hunter." Smooth permission, no mercy in those eyes full of death.

Stepping back until she was almost in the hallway, she put through the call on her cell phone, aware of Janvier and Nazarach talking in low voices about things long past, shadows of which experiences clung to Nazarach, but not to Janvier.

Angel and vampire. Both touched by immortality, both compelling, but in vastly different ways. Nazarach was a being honed out of time, perfect, lethal, and utterly, absolutely inhuman. Janvier, in contrast, was earth and blood, deadly and a little rough . . . and still somehow of this world.

"Ashwini?" Sara's familiar tone. "What's the problem?"

She laid out Nazarach's orders. "Has it been cleared?"

"Yes." The Guild Director sighed. "I wish to hell we didn't have to get involved in what promises to turn into a giant clusterfuck, but

there's no way out."

"He's playing games."

"He's an angel," Sara said, and it was an answer. "And technically Monique is in breach of her Contract, so Nazarach has the power to send out anyone and anything to retrieve her—even if he could achieve the same aim with a single phone call."

"Damn." Ashwini liked working on the edges, but when angels got involved, those edges tended to cut bone deep, drawing the dark red of lifeblood. "You got my back?"

"Always." An unflinching response. "I've put Kenji and Baden on standby—give the signal and we'll have you out of there in under an hour."

"Thanks, Sara."

"Hey, I don't want to lose my main source of live entertainment." A smile she could almost hear. "No new hunt order has come in for the Cajun. Just thought you'd want to know."

"Uh-huh." Ashwini hung up with a quick good-bye, wondering what Sara would say if she knew exactly who Ashwini was consorting with at the moment.

Janvier turned right at that instant—as if he'd sensed her attention. Shaking off the thought, she walked back to join vampire and angel. "Do you have any idea where Callan might be holding Monique?"

The angel's eyes dipped to her lips, and she had to fight the urge to run. Because while Nazarach might be agonizingly beautiful, she had the gut-wrenching sense that his idea of pleasure would mean only the most excruciating pain for her.

"No," he finally said, his gaze moving to her own. "But he'll be at the Fisherman's Daughter tomorrow night." Amber lit with power. "Tonight, you will be my guest."

Not even the Atlanta heat could fight the chill that invaded her veins, a cold blade of warning.

Sleepless, Ashwini sat on the balcony off the guest suite Nazarach had provided. She'd have preferred a tent in the park, a bed in a shelter, anything to the opulence of the angel's home—all of it stained with a screaming terror that refused to let her sleep. "How many men and women do you think Nazarach's killed over his lifetime?" Usually, she sensed things only through touch, but like its master, this place was so old, so bloody with memory, that it echoed endlessly in her mind.

"Thousands," came the soft answer from the vampire leaning against the wall beside the antique lounge where she sat. "Angels who rule can't afford to be merciful."

She turned her face into the night breeze. "And yet some people

see them as messengers of the gods."

"They are who they are. As am I." Turning, he walked over to brace his hands on the gleaming wooden arms of her lounge. "I must feed, *cher*."

Something twisted in her chest, a sharp, unexpected ache, but she held it, held control. "I'm guessing you don't have much trouble finding food."

"I can give pleasure with my bite. There are those who seek such pleasures." Lifting a finger, he traced the scar just above the pulse in her neck. "Who marked you?" A quiet question formed of pure ice.

"My first hunt. I was young, inexperienced. The vamp got close enough to almost rip out my throat." What she didn't say was that she'd let the target get that close, let herself feel the kiss of death. Until that moment—when her blood scented the air in an iron-rich perfume—she'd thought she wanted to die, to silence the voices forever. "He taught me to value life."

"I will ask Nazarach's indulgence," Janvier said after an endless moment, "use the store of blood kept here for his vampires."

Her senses honed in on something she'd barely seen, words unsaid. "What aren't you telling me?"

"The angel wants me to leave you alone." Janvier's breath brushed over her in a intimate caress. "Otherwise that blood would've already been provided. He wants me to go out and hunt."

Shivers threatened at the idea of what Nazarach wanted from her. "So you'll anger him."

"He likes me too much to kill me for such a small transgression." Still, he didn't move. "Why are there so many shadows in your eyes, Ashwini?"

It startled her each time he used her given name—as if every utterance bound them tighter on a level she couldn't see. "Why are there so many secrets in yours?"

"I've lived over two hundred years," he said, his voice as sensual as the magnolia-scented night. "I've done many things, not all of which I'm proud of."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

He didn't smile, didn't even breathe, still, so still. "Talk to me, my Blade."

"No." Not yet.

"I'm very patient."

"We'll see." Even as she spoke, she knew she was laying down a challenge, one Janvier wouldn't be able to resist.

He leaned in close enough that their lips could've touched, his breath a hot burn, his almost-immortality a living beacon in his eyes. "Yes. We will."

Stepping into the shower, Ashwini turned it to freezing. “Yikes!” Her libido sufficiently dampened by the ice-cold shock, she switched it to superhot.

As her skin sizzled under the delicious heat, she supposed she should’ve been giving serious thought to the lunacy of what she was doing playing with a vampire, who was, for all his charm, as lethal as a stiletto across the throat. But then again, most of her friends already thought she was half a nut short of a fruitcake. Why disappoint?

She grinned against the pounding spray.

Rules and regs, the intricacies of living an “ordinary” life—she’d tried it for the first nineteen years of her existence, and had almost paid with not only her sanity, but her life itself.

A flash of memory and she was in that white-on-white room again, the straps biting into her arms, cutting into her flesh. The smell of disinfectant, the soft hush of rubber-soled shoes . . . and always, *always*—the screams, screams only she could hear. Later, *them* sitting there, judging her, as if they were gods.

“*The drugs keep her lucid.*”

“*Are you sure she’ll stay on them once we release her?*”

“*She’s going out on her brother’s recognizance. And Dr. Taj is, as we all know, a most well-regarded physician.*”

“*Ashwini, can you hear us? We need you to answer some questions.*”

She’d answered their questions, said what she knew they wanted to hear. It had been the last day she’d ever pretended to be “normal.” So they’d let her out, let her go. “Never again,” she whispered.

And the hell of it was, people still liked her.

Her hand fisted. Not everyone. Dr. Taj wanted only the sister he’d known before, the rising star whose glitter matched his own. Who the hell cared if that star had been dying piece by slow piece as she tried desperately to hang on to a sky she’d never quite understood?

It was the heat that wrenched her out of the abyss, as her skin began to protest its treatment. Flicking off the water with a grateful sigh, she rubbed herself down using the fluffy peach-colored towel that went with the elegant décor of the room. It would’ve been normal to head out into the bedroom in the matching robe hung on the back of the door, but Ashwini was a hunter. And, within the Guild, paranoia was not just accepted but encouraged.

It was as well. Because when she walked out—barefoot, but otherwise dressed, her gun hidden in the curve of her lower back—it was to find the most dangerous being in Atlanta waiting for her.

“Nazarach,” she said, stopping in the bathroom doorway. “This is a surprise.”

The angel stepped out onto the balcony. “Come.”

Sensing it would be suicidal to refuse, she followed him out into the summer air, the night heavy with the warm scents of the flowers that ringed the estate. “Janvier?”

“I know his tastes well.”

Ashwini’s hands clenched on the railing—a courtesy for guests, one she hadn’t expected. “Why am I here?” *Why are you?*

Nazarach leaned his elbows on the railing, his wings relaxed but no less magnificent. “I asked for you on this hunt. Do you know why?”

“I’ve done previous work in tracking down kidnap victims.” In most cases, those vampires had been taken by some hate group that planned to torture the “sin” of vampirism out of them. “I intended to do some background work on Monique tonight.”

“Leave it. She’ll stay alive and unharmed until Callan gets what he wants.”

“You sound very certain.”

The angel smiled and it was like no smile she’d ever seen, heavy with age, with the shadows of death that twisted around her senses like razor-sharp thorns.

“Callan,” Nazarach said, “didn’t survive my court by being without wit. He knows that while now Antoine plays politics, the oldest Beaumont will find a way to kill him if he harms Monique. So long as Antoine lives, Monique will, too.”

“You could stop this feud,” she said, focusing on breathing, on staying alive. “All you have to do is give your support to either Antoine or Callan.”

“Everyone needs to evolve.” A cool statement, one that held the chill winds of time. “Antoine is growing too settled—it may be time for the mantle to pass to Callan.”

“I thought you liked Antoine.”

“I’m an angel—liking someone is only one part of the equation.” His face turned toward her, his expression lethal in its very neutrality. “I asked for you because you bloodied an angel who tried to take you a year ago.”

Chapter Four

Her heart was a rock in her throat. “He was young and stupid—it wasn’t hard to disable him long enough to get away.”

“You pinned his wings to a wall with seven crossbow bolts.”

Swallowing the rock, she decided to hell with it. “Was he a relative?”

“Even if he had been, I don’t abide lack of intelligence in those around me. Egan was punished for his idiocy.”

Ashwini truly didn’t want to know what Nazarach had done to the slender angel who’d attempted to make her his playmate. But the wildness in her couldn’t help asking, “Because he tried to go after a hunter . . . or because he failed?”

Another cold smile. “You should ask Egan—his tongue has regrown.” Rising from his relaxed position, he held out a hand. “Fly with me, Ashwini.”

Even from a foot away, it felt as if he was wrapping her in a thousand ropes, strangling, crushing, killing. “I can’t touch you.”

His eyes gleamed and she saw her death in them. “I’m so distasteful?”

“You have too much in you,” she whispered, fighting for breath. “Too many lives, too many memories, too many ghosts.”

That hand lowered, his expression intrigued. “You have the eye?”

Such an old way of speaking. But then, Nazarach had seen empires rise and kings fall. “Of a kind.” She backed up, trying to find air in a world that suddenly seemed to have none.

When Janvier’s hand came around her nape, she accepted the touch without startlement, as if something in her had known, had reached for him. One touch, and suddenly her throat opened, the summer air sweet as nectar to her parched lungs.

“Sire,” Janvier said, his voice soft, his address one of respect. “Don’t destroy a treasure for a moment’s fleeting pleasure.”

“Audrina was not to your taste?” the angel asked, his eyes never moving off Ashwini. “I find that hard to believe.”

“My tastes have changed.” Janvier’s free hand came to rest on her upper arm. “Even if Ash isn’t cooperating.”

Nazarach went motionless for a moment—and at that instant, Ashwini knew she’d fight the death he threw at them. Because she’d brought Janvier into this. He was hers to protect.

But then Nazarach laughed, and the danger passed. “She’ll be the death of you, Janvier.”

“It’s my death to choose.”

Spreading out his wings, Nazarach smiled that cold, immortal

smile. “Perhaps watching you dance with the hunter will be far more entertaining than taking her.” A minute later, he’d swept off the balcony and into the sky, a magnificent, haunting being with as much cruelty in him as wisdom.

Ashwini tried to pull away from Janvier. The vampire held her. “So, you’re a *sorcière*.”

Janvier, too, she thought, was old. “Witches get burned at the stake.”

“Do you see my ghosts, Ash?” A quiet question.

She was glad to be able to shake her head. “I see only what you show me.”

Lips brushing her neck an instant before she broke away to spin around and face him. “Audrina?”

“A delectable morsel.” His eyes went to her breasts and she realized her damp hair had left them rather well-defined.

Had Nazarach considered that an invitation?

Shivering inwardly, she turned to twist the damp mass off her neck and into a knot.

“Beautiful,” Janvier murmured. “I could stare at your neck for hours. So long, so slender.” The languorous cadence of his voice stroked over her, into her.

Even knowing that he was an almost-immortal who’d likely forget her between one heartbeat and the next, it took everything she had to fight the urge to give in to the seduction of him. “Maybe you should go back to your delectable morsel.”

“I chose a bottle of preserved blood instead.” Walking over, he stood beside her, staring out at the sky into which Nazarach had disappeared. “Seems I’m tempted by far more dangerous fare these days.”

Ashwini considered walking away, then decided she didn’t want to tangle with the ghosts, not when she could steal a few more moments of blessed silence. So she stayed outside, shoulder to thigh with a vampire who might yet make her break all her rules about sleeping with the enemy.

The Fisherman’s Daughter was exactly as advertised—a tavern that served beer, hard spirits, and hearty food. No fancy hors d’oeuvres and chichi décor for this place. It was all wooden beams and buxom serving maids.

“Wenches,” Janvier said when she voiced the thought. “They’re always wenches in a tavern.”

She watched him take a leisurely survey of the plump, silken flesh on view. “If I liked women, I’d go for the redhead.”

“Hmm, too short. I like my women long and lean.” A smile that

told her he was thinking thoughts that would undoubtedly make a lesser woman blush. “But, for a ménage à trois, yes, she’d do.”

“Any man who tries to bring a third into my bed had better be wearing armor.” She played a silver throwing star in and around her fingers.

“Possessive?” Janvier said, his tone dropping. “So am I.”

Raising her head to answer, she froze. “Callan just walked in with a small Hispanic woman.”

Janvier ran his foot up her calf. “A bit on the side?”

“No. She moves like she knows how to use that gun hidden under her shirt.” Watching the two banter with the barman, she ate a chunky piece of fried potato. “Time to earn your keep. Charm your way into their circle.”

“In that case, you’ll have to pretend to be *my* bit on the side.”

“I can’t pretend to be harmless.”

A thin line of blood marred Janvier’s thumb as he picked up the gleaming silver star she’d left on the table. He didn’t even flinch. “I’ve always been known to skate on the wrong side of the line.” Getting up, he slid the star into a pocket and began to amble toward the bar, his lazy, long-limbed stride catching every female eye in the place . . . including that of Callan’s enforcer.

But the woman went on immediate alert the instant Janvier reached out to tap Callan on the shoulder. “Cal, that you?”

The enforcer didn’t relax until her big, blond boss turned to give Janvier a back-slapping hug. “Damn, Cajun, you’re not dead yet?”

“Why the hell does everyone ask me that?” Janvier said without heat before bestowing a dazzling smile on the enforcer. “Won’t you introduce me?”

Laughing, the leader of the Fox kiss turned to the female vampire by his side. “Perida, this is Janvier. Don’t trust a word that comes out of his mouth.”

Ashwini decided it was time to make her move.

“A pleasure, darlin’.” Lifting the woman’s delicate hand to his mouth, Janvier went to kiss it.

Ashwini put her own hand on his shoulder, squeezed. “I wouldn’t.”

“*Cher.*” Janvier released a surprised Perida with a languid shrug. “So possessive you are.” Playful words, an intimate joke.

Ashwini looked up in time to catch Callan’s eye. One glance and she knew he’d taken in her clothing, her stance, the scars on her fingers, just above her pulse. So it didn’t surprise her when he said, “Hunter.”

“Vampire.” She leaned into Janvier, let him put his arm around her waist. The touch seared her, made her hunger for more. “We

ready to go?"

Janvier played his part to perfection, sending her a charming smile. "Callan is an old friend, *cherie.*" A quick squeeze, a cajoling smile. "Surely we can dally a little while? A drink, Callan?"

The Fox leader nodded. "Figures you'd hook up with a woman who might one day hunt you down like a rabid dog."

"Already tried," Ashwini said, deciding Callan would likely have that information within the hour in any case. "Three times."

Callan raised an eyebrow as Perida attempted to hide her surprise. "And will there be a fourth?"

"Depends on how badly he pisses me off." Sticking out her hand, she offered it to Perida. "Ashwini."

The other woman shook it, her hold firm, her eyes narrowed. "We don't associate with hunters."

"And I don't sleep with vampires."

That made Callan grin, and it was so open, so honest, Ashwini could almost believe he was the good ol' farm boy he seemed. "Let's sit," he said, ordering wine from the bar.

Ashwini offered Perida a fry as they sat down, knowing vampires could taste and digest a small amount of solid food. "It's good."

The vampire took it. "Mmm. Almost makes me wish I was mortal."

"Almost," Callan said, his eyes lingering on Ashwini's scars.

It was, she thought, a very deliberate reminder that he could survive almost anything she did to him, while she'd die a very final death. But that warning was clearly only on the periphery of Callan's mind—it was Janvier he was interested in.

"You still friends with Antoine?" he asked after taking a sip of his wine, the question as casual as casual could be.

"*Oui,* I'm friends with everyone." Janvier pressed a kiss to Ashwini's cheek. "But this one, she doesn't like . . . what is her name?"

"Simone." Ashwini ate several fries in a row instead of illuminating.

Perida picked up the bait. "Why?"

"Have you seen her?" Ashwini snorted. "Thinks the sun shines out of her ass."

Perida's suspicious expression turned into one of pure dislike. "She's a bitch, especially for being so pathetically weak. She makes like she's got power. Bullshit."

Ashwini raised an eyebrow. "I thought she was on her third century. Can't be that much of a lightweight."

"Age is relative." Perida shook her head. "Only thing keeping that smug smile on her face is the fact she's got Antoine on a leash."

"Antoine likes hard women," Janvier said, an amused cast to his

voice. “Remember that one he was with when we were at court together, Cal?”

“That countess with six dead husbands.” Callan shook his head. “You’d think with age would come wisdom.”

“Instead, *mon ami*’s got himself in trouble from what I hear.”

Callan put down his wineglass. “Oh?”

“Games, Cal?” Janvier raised a sarcastic eyebrow. “You know of Antoine’s difficulties—word is, you’ve got yourself a kiss.”

“You know a lot for someone who’s passing through.” Cool words, guarded eyes.

Janvier shrugged. “Keeps me alive. I’m staying clear of Antoine this visit—I don’t want Nazarach’s attention.”

The leader of the Fox kiss picked up his glass again. “Where are you staying?”

Ashwini answered for both of them. “We’re not. He promised me we’d be out of here tonight.”

Janvier leaned in close, murmuring just loud enough that the others would hear. “Come, sugar, one night? I will make it up to you.”

Ashwini scowled, let him murmur more promises before nodding with obvious reluctance. “One night.”

“So,” Janvier said, turning back to Callan, “can you put us up, old friend?”

“We were never friends,” Callan replied. “But . . . we could be.”

Ashwini found herself relegated to the guest bedroom in Callan’s fortress of a mansion on the outskirts of Atlanta, while the Fox leader took Janvier aside for a “cigar.” Knowing she was under surveillance, Ashwini locked herself in the bathroom, checked that it wasn’t wired, then tried to figure out if she could make her way through the old-fashioned air vent. It would be a tight fit, she thought, but she could do it.

“No time like the present.” Stripping down to a tank top and boxer shorts, she turned on the shower, and used the cover of noise to unscrew the plate and get herself into the shaft. There was barely enough wiggle room that she could move. Good thing she didn’t have hips to speak of.

Keeping a mental map in her head, she began to crawl through dust and piles of small, round, hard things that she preferred not to think about. Thank God she’d had all her inoculations. The first room she came to was empty; the second full of the murmurs of men and women grabbing something to eat. The third she almost bypassed because it was so quiet, but something made her stop, take a second look.

The woman in front of the vanity was utterly and absolutely lovely. Hair that was stunningly close to true gold, eyes of electric

blue, full lips and skin so smooth and flawless, it was almost translucent against the white satin of her thigh-length robe. And she'd only been a vampire a year.

What would Monique Beaumont look like after a century of vampirism?

Ashwini's lips pursed in a silent whistle. Given that it took decades for most vampires to reach Monique's level of physical perfection, the woman might just put the angels to shame. But right now, as she brushed her hair, it was a very human smile that flirted with those lush red lips. Nothing about her screamed "captive."

That fit with what Nazarach had said about Callan treating her well until Antoine was out of the equation. As if the thought had conjured him up, the door opened to reveal the vampire in question, his blunt masculinity at odds with the sky blue and cream décor of what was clearly a woman's boudoir.

"Callie," Monique said, her tone husky with reproach. "It's getting tedious to be confined to this room."

Locking the door behind himself, Callan leaned back against it, arms crossed, as Monique shifted around on her stool—to display the sleek length of one slender thigh. The gesture was sexual, but it was the look in the woman's eyes that interested Ashwini. Predatory . . . but also, aroused?

Feeling like a voyeur, she continued to watch as Monique ran her hand down her thigh. "Has my father agreed to your ransom?"

Callan's eyes locked on Monique's fingers as she touched herself with slow, hypnotic strokes. "I haven't asked for a ransom."

Monique pouted, all sex and a sweet, dark hunger. "Are you planning to kill me, Callie?"

Chapter Five

"You're not that good, Monique, so stop with the seduction act." Hard words, but his voice had dropped, his face tight with strain.

Getting up off the stool, the beautiful vampire crossed the thick cream-colored carpet. "Liar. I'm very good. I had Jean for a mentor." Putting her hands flat on Callan's wide chest, she rose on tiptoe. "And you're quite luscious."

Callan held her back with a hand fisted in golden hair that screamed Monique's immortality. "Try leading me around by the cock, Monique, and you'll find your hand hacked off."

Monique's lips seem to grow even fuller at the threat, her nipples beading against the satin. "Take me." She rubbed herself sensually against him. "It'll be the best choice you ever make."

"I'm fully capable of having sex with you," Callan whispered against her throat, "then burning you to true death."

"I'd be more useful to you alive." Trembling visibly, Monique ran her hands up to cup Callan's face. "I hate Simone. She takes Grandfather's attention away from me."

"Are you saying you'll betray Antoine to get at Simone?"

"I'm saying we could work out a mutual agreement." Her nails were perfect ovals against Callan's skin. "You get rid of Simone for me, become my consort and my grandfather's right-hand man. The old transitioning to the new."

Callan's jaw hardened. "Sorry, sweetheart, I'm not playing second fiddle to anyone—least of all a vicious brat who'd sell out her own family."

Ashwini saw the flash of surprise in Monique's eyes the instant before Callan kissed her. Hearing the other woman moan in the back of her throat, Ashwini decided she'd seen more than enough to form a conclusion, though what that conclusion might be, she had no idea. Two wrong turns later, she found herself back in her bathroom. Jumping out of the vent, she replaced the cover, then got into the shower and scrubbed herself until her skin stung.

When she walked out into the bedroom, dressed in jeans and a tee, she wasn't surprised to see Perida waiting for her. "We got worried when you didn't answer the door," the vampire said.

Ashwini held out a hand, palm up. "Ear plugs. Hate getting water in my ears." Rubbing at her hair with a towel, she looked at the woman questioningly. "Where's Janvier?"

"Walking in the gardens."

Ashwini threw the towel over a chair. "I think I might join him." She felt Perida's eyes on her all the way to the roses where she'd spied

Janvier. “You won’t believe what I saw,” she said, wondering if Monique and Callan were even now locked in that embrace powered by equal amounts of lust, ambition, and loathing.

“Try me.”

She did, had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes widen. “Think Callan still intends to go through with his plan of wiping out Antoine then getting rid of Monique?” she asked.

“If he wants to seize power in Atlanta,” Janvier said with the icy pragmatism of an almost-immortal, “he’ll have to eliminate Jean, Frédéric, and the others, too.”

Ashwini thought of the ruthlessness she’d seen in Callan’s expression as he spoke to the Beaumont vampire. “He’s capable of it. But, no matter what he says, he’s also susceptible to Monique.”

“There’s a chance Monique won’t want to be rescued,” Janvier pointed out, “not if she thinks she can get Callan round to her way of thinking.”

“Doesn’t matter. Nazarach wants her.” And not even the most ambitious young vampire would dare gainsay their sire. Angels had torture down to a fine art—and those screams locked in the walls of his home told her Nazarach was better at it than most. “You’d think,” she murmured, “that Monique would’ve had better sense than to ask to be Made after seeing the life Antoine and Jean lead.”

“There are advantages to being a vampire.” Janvier stopped to pick up and bring the trailing edge of a climbing rose to her nose.

The scent was decadent, luxurious. “Maybe,” she said, taking another perfume-laced breath, “but once Nazarach has Monique back, he’ll use her as he might use a chess piece. And she has to let him. For a hundred years, she’ll have no freedom, no self-will. She’ll be less than a pet.”

Dropping the rose, Janvier thrust his hands into his pockets. “You’ve never asked how I was Made.” His voice was missing its usual music, something brittle and hard in every syllable.

“You fell in love with a vampire.”

He froze. “Been researching me?” His anger was hidden but as apparent as the sickle-shaped moon in the soft summer sky.

“Didn’t have to.” She shrugged. “Man like you, your personality, doesn’t easily accept submission. But if you decided to give yourself to someone, you’d do anything for that person—even if the choice half killed you.”

“I’m so obvious?”

“No.” She met his eyes, stripped away a single fragile layer of her own shields. “You’re like me.”

“Ah.” That beautiful hair of his glittered under the moonlight as he began to walk again. “Have you ever trusted that deeply, *cherie*?”

Yes, and she bore the scars still. The marks on her back she could almost forget . . . but the ones on her soul? Those, she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to forgive. "We're not talking about me. What happened to your lover?"

"Shamiya became tired of me after a few years. I was left to the most tender mercies of Neha."

"The Queen of Poisons?"

A slow nod. "Being in her court was . . . part nightmare, part ecstasy. I've never experienced such pain as I did at Neha's hands, but she also showed me pleasure I didn't know could exist."

Ashwini thought of the archangel, with her skin of dusky brown, her sloe-eyed gaze, her exotic sexuality. "Is that why you're drawn to me?" She was no beauty, but her skin was the same Eastern shade, her eyes as dark. "Because she imprinted on you somehow?"

Janvier laughed and it was a truly delighted sound, one she'd heard from him only once or twice—usually when he bested her on a hunt. "Neha," he said, "is as cold as the snakes she keeps as pets. You, my fierce hunter, are wildfire. Two more different women could not exist."

The cold feeling in her stomach dissipated under the heat of his laughter. "So, what did you learn before Callan went to play tonsil hockey with Ms. Beaumont?"

"He asked me to stay on, join the Fox kiss." His body brushed hers as they walked.

She wanted to get even closer, touch, be touched. Feel human. "I thought he'd know you aren't the joining type."

"I will fight for what's important," he said, his voice missing its usual amusement. "But this—petty politics—*non*."

"Is that what you told Callan?"

"Of course. Anything else would've made him suspicious." He nodded left and, seeing the lily pond in the distance, she acquiesced. "But now he accepts that I will not take sides."

"Too bad he forgot the biggest player."

"Only a fool forgets an angel." Going down on his haunches by the pond, he put one hand on the back of her calf as she stood beside him.

Aching for contact that demanded nothing from her except the most human of sensations, she didn't shift away, didn't remind him of her rule against dating vampires. She simply stood there and let the warmth of him soak into her bones. He was an enigma, Janvier. She'd seen him ice-cold, a predator, and she'd seen him bathed in sunshine. Some might've asked which was the real man—she knew he was both.

"Do you love her still?" she found herself asking.

"Who?"

"The vampire. Shamiya."

His hand squeezed her calf in gentle reproof. "A silly question, *cher*. You know love cannot survive where there is no light."

Yes, she thought, he was right. "What was she like?"

"Why so curious?"

"I just wonder what kind of a woman would've captured a man like you."

"But I wasn't this man when she knew me." He leaned his body against hers. "I was a callow youth. I've learned since then."

Accepting the answer, she turned her eyes to the pond, where the sickle moon made the lilies shimmer with midnight shadows. For the first time in years, her mind was completely quiet, completely her own. The peace of it was extraordinary.

When she ran her fingers through Janvier's hair, he sighed but held the silence.

Three hours later, the peace was a memory as they found themselves in an alcove in the corridor leading to the bedroom where Monique was being held. "You sure Callan's still in his study?"

Janvier nodded. "I saw him return to it not long ago."

"Good, but even if we manage to sneak Monique out of her room," she murmured, peering around the corner, "how do we get her past the guards?"

Janvier fiddled with the lock pick kit he'd produced out of nowhere. "This would be much easier if we could use Nazarach's name."

"Games." Seeing who'd come out on top. "He's pitting the two vampires against each other, us against Callan. We matter nothing except for the weaknesses we expose in Callan's operation."

"Nazarach has grown old fast."

"He looks in the prime of his life."

"No. Here." Janvier put a fist over his heart. "I've met Favashi, the archangel who rules Persia. She is over a thousand years old—but Favashi still has her heart, still has a humanity that is utterly lacking in Nazarach."

Ashwini gave a slow nod. "There are vampires like that, too."

"If I ever become one, Ashblade, consider it a mercy killing and take me out."

"Shh." Spying Perida's petite form coming to relieve the guard on duty, she motioned Janvier to step back with her. "We take Perida hostage, use her to get Monique out."

"Callan will shoot Perida to keep Monique," Janvier told her. "Perida would let him—she knows she won't die unless Cal turns out to be a very bad shot."

"And people call me crazy." Squatting in the alcove, she blew out

a breath. “Trigger the smoke alarms, cause a panic?”

“Vampires are immune to smoke,” Janvier murmured, eyes the green of the bayou at night, “but not to fire. Set something on fire if you really want panic.”

“I don’t want to kill innocents.”

“No vampire over fifty is innocent, *cherie.*” But his voice was gentle. “We can use the curtains down the hall—it’ll get them far enough away, without endangering anyone in the rooms.”

Ashwini checked her pockets and came up with a lighter from what Sara called her Girl Scout kit. “Go distract Perida.”

A flash of teeth, pure sin in a smile. “Remember, you asked me to do it.”

Narrowing her eyes, she waited as he circled around to enter the hallway from the other end. Perida immediately went to intercept him, and while Janvier flirted with her using that lazy Cajun charm, Ashwini crept out and down to the curtains, hoping like hell there were no security cameras in the hall. She’d spotted none, but she’d have felt better if she’d been able to do a full scan.

Unfortunately, there was no time—according to the gossip Ashwini and Janvier had both picked up, Callan intended to move against Antoine tomorrow morning. The instant he did, Atlanta would turn into a bloodbath as the Beaumont vampires went up against the Fox kiss. Knowing Nazarach, the angel would let the city burn no matter that it was the innocent who’d get caught in the ensuing inferno.

Holding her breath until the edge of the curtain flickered yellow, she made it back to her hiding spot just as Perida laughed and pushed Janvier gently in the chest. Janvier put a hand dramatically to his heart but backed off, calling out a friendly b*onne nuit* as he disappeared around the corner.

Perida was still smiling when she reached her spot in front of Monique’s room. It didn’t last long. “Fire!” Screaming out the warning, she unlocked Monique’s door and ran in to grab the hostage.

The gorgeous Beaumont vampire had obviously been asleep, her body clad in a filmy white nightgown that barely touched her thighs. However, she assessed the situation fast. “Go, help put out the fire,” she ordered Perida. “I’ll make my way outside.”

Instead of obeying, Perida took Monique’s arm and began to pull her down the corridor. “I don’t think so, Ms. Beaumont. You stay with me.”

“Where exactly do you think I’ll run in a nightgown and bare feet?” came the lethally cultured response.

“You’re as immortal as I am,” Perida said, every inch the cold-eyed enforcer. “A bit of weather and a few cuts won’t do anything but

inconvenience you for a couple of minutes."

"Then perhaps I wish to stay for another reason." Her tone was all innuendo. "He is rather delicious."

Perida's back snapped steel straight . . . leaving her vulnerable for the barest fraction of an instant. It was all Ashwini needed. Slipping up behind the enforcer, she hit Perida hard enough on the back of the head to have killed a human. It only just put the vampire out. The other vampire, the beauty, stared at her. "Who are you?"

"I've been sent to retrieve you."

"I'm not planning on leaving."

Chapter Six

Ashwini gave the other woman a smile she'd learned to form in that white-on-white hell her brother dumped her in, all the while telling her it would hurt him more than her. "You signed your Contract in blood. You're now in default."

Monique's face went sheet white. "Surely he won't hold me to account for that." A wire-thin voice. "I was under duress."

"Doesn't look like it. Now shut up and follow me."

The fact that Monique suddenly turned meek told Ashwini all she needed to know about Nazarach. "Down here." Grabbing the vampire's arm, she thrust Monique into an alcove an instant before several of Callan's men came pounding down the corridor. Raising her arm, she pointed toward the smoke. "Fire's that way!"

One almost stopped, his eyes narrowing, but then a shout went up as someone found Perida's collapsed form and he went running. Ashwini pulled Monique out of the alcove, pelting down the hall at breakneck speed.

"Ash!"

Twisting toward the door Janvier had shoved open, she almost threw the target inside before snapping the lock. A brush of wind against her face had her noticing the wide-open balcony doors—she could've kissed Janvier at that moment. Then he reached behind himself to pull off the crossbow she'd resigned herself to abandoning, along with the rest of the stuff in her duffel. Swinging the precious weapon over her head, she pressed her lips to his surprised ones in a hard, nibbling caress. "Don't suppose you managed to scare up a car, too?"

The Cajun blinked, shook his head, smiled. "We can do that once we're outside."

They were moving even as they spoke, heading to the balcony. "Can you jump?" she asked Janvier.

His answer was to pull himself up to crouch on the railing. "Monique." He held out a hand.

Ashwini wanted to cut off the lily-white hand that slid into his—Monique's skin was as flawlessly delicate as the fine bones of her face. Instead, she kept watch on the doorway as the two vampires jumped the considerable distance to the ground and came to a safe, catlike landing on their feet.

Janvier looked up just as someone began to kick at the bedroom door. Running back, she locked the balcony doors to slow them down a bit more, then swung over the railing. Janvier was holding up his arms in a promise to catch her, but Ashwini didn't trust anyone that

much.

Snapping out the thin cable worked into the bracelet she wore on her left wrist, she tied one end around the balcony struts, then wrapped the rest around her hands and rappelled down at speed that cut burn marks into her palms. She left the cable where it was, knowing the Fox vampires would have no use for it, and turned to find Janvier waiting for her, eyebrow raised.

"Car," she said pointedly.

He waved left. "The drive is that way."

"It'll be swarming with Callan's people." Scowling, she turned right. "Isn't there a garage back there?"

Janvier's eyes gleamed. "I think I saw a Hummer drive in an hour ago."

They looked at each other. Smiled.

"What?" Monique made a show of stepping from foot to foot, as if cold, when the temperature was well above balmy.

"Keep up," Ashwini said and took off toward the garage, knowing the vampire would do as directed—the fear in her eyes at the mere allusion to Nazarach's anger had been punishingly real.

The garage was locked, but there were no guards, likely thanks to the fire. "Up there." Ashwini pointed to the window just below the roof.

Janvier didn't wait. Jogging back several feet, he came toward the wall at a hard run, jumping up to the window ledge in a single powerful leap. Hearing Monique's gasp, Ashwini turned. "You haven't seen anyone do that before?" She'd assumed all older vamps could move with that feral grace.

The blonde shook her head, lips parted, eyes wide open. "I'm pretty sure even Grandfather can't move like that and he's starting on his sixth century."

Glass rained down as Janvier punched his way through and dropped inside the garage . . . in the nick of time. Because Ashwini could feel the thunder of pursuit under the soles of her feet. Taking out her gun, she turned to Monique. "You have any offensive capabilities? Know how to fire a weapon?"

"My face and my body are my weapons, Guild Hunter." A hint of that upper-class sneer entered her tone. "Sex is about as physical as I get."

"Bully for you." She slammed a fist on the garage door. "Hurry, Janvier!"

"Since when is a vampire part of the Hunters Guild?" Monique asked, slipping behind Ashwini as the first pursuer appeared around the corner, his hand lifting to showcase an impressive gun.

Ignoring his arm, Ashwini shot him in the leg. He crumpled like

so much paper, but there was already a second man and then a third. "Janvier!"

The door slid back just enough for Monique and Ashwini to slip in. Janvier was opening the doors to the Hummer by the time she turned . . . to see the bright yellow vehicle purring in quiet readiness. "Hot damn." Shifting on her heel, she shot out the legs of two more pursuers.

"*Allons!*"

Taking one last shot, she scrambled into the front, while Monique curled herself down in the back.

Janvier shot her a grin. "Buckle up."

"Snap." Bracing her feet, she nodded. "Go!"

They slammed out of the garage with a screeching of bent metal and torn wire as the doors folded in their path. Screams sounded as men and women got out of the way, but the Hummer was stopping for no one. And when bullets ricocheted off the sides, Ashwini grinned. "Guess Callan's paranoid, too."

"Lucky for us." Janvier shifted up a gear as they raced over Callan's manicured lawns and crashed their way through a hedge or three.

Ashwini used the chance to reload her gun and twist her head to check if Monique was still alive. The blonde vampire stared at her with eyes so round, the whites showed on every side. "You're both insane."

Grinning, Ashwini twisted back round to the front . . . just in time to see another Hummer coming at them on an intercept path from the right. "Janvier, you see that?" She lowered her window. "Callan's driving."

"Distract him, *cher*."

"Already on it." Cooling her mind until there was nothing and no one else in it, she took aim at the moving target. Her first bullet hit the tire rim, but the second was a bull's-eye. "He's got some protective coating on the tires," she muttered when the bullet failed to do any damage. Dropping the gun, she picked up the crossbow and notched a bolt into place.

The Hummer bounced hard as they went over a small flowering hedge and onto the drive, but she kept her attention on the other vehicle, ignoring the gunshots coming her way. Callan's face came into startlingly close focus as the other vampire turned his black Hummer hard to the left in an attempt to cut them off.

"Sorry, Callie," Ashwini whispered almost to herself, "not today." The bolt slammed into the Hummer's back wheel, skewing the vehicle sideways. It only slowed Callan a fraction, but a fraction was all they needed.

"Down!" Janvier yelled as he drove hell-bent for leather through and over the cars barricading the metal gates. Safety glass showered on her head and the Hummer groaned ominously, but then, suddenly, they were on the road, heading away from Callan and his crew far faster than anyone could possibly catch up.

Lifting up her head, she dusted off the glass . . . and saw Janvier's shoulder pinned to the seat with a metal spike that had to have come from the gate. He was still driving, his teeth gritted, his face ripped and torn. Ignoring Monique's slew of complaints from the backseat, Ashwini undid her safety belt, turned to brace her back against the dash, and took hold of the spike. "Ready, *cher*?"

He shot her a smile stained bloodred. "Go."

Knowing that vampirism didn't protect against pain, she took a firm grip, waited until they were on a smooth stretch of road, and pulled. Janvier swore in a rapid stream of very blue Cajun French, but managed to keep the car on its path. Staring at the thickness of the thing she'd pulled out, she felt her stomach churn. "Fucker's bigger than a crossbow bolt."

"Good to know it won't hurt as much when you shoot me."

She dropped the metal on the car mat and returned to her seat. "I better call Nazarach." Right this second, she couldn't think about shooting Janvier, not when she'd felt his hand on her head as they went through that gate.

Monique whimpered. "Don't take me back to him. Please."

"You know the rules." Janvier's tone was harder than Ashwini had ever heard. "You knew the rules better than most Candidates before you decided to be Made. Don't try to change them now."

"I didn't know there'd be this much terror." The female vampire met Ashwini's eyes in the mirror. "Have you seen him? Met him?"

At Ashwini's nod, Monique continued. "Now imagine being alone in a room with him, imagine him walking around and around you while you stand there trying *not* to think about all the things he could do to you . . . knowing you'll remain conscious for all of them."

"I don't have to imagine," Ashwini said, her throat husky with memory. "I've been on Guild rescue squads. I've seen vampires survive things no one should survive."

"It all heals," Monique whispered. "I once saw Jean lose both her legs as punishment. It healed. I thought then that it wouldn't be so bad. But the mind . . . it doesn't heal." Her gaze went to Janvier, but the other vampire was focused on the road, his torn face repairing itself before Ashwini's eyes.

He'd need blood soon, she realized. Lots of it. Already, he was looking thinner, his bones stark against his skin. "Can you make it to Nazarach's?" she asked.

"Will you offer me your sweet blood if I say *non*?"

"That answers the question."

A small smile, lines of white bracketing his mouth. "A favor, *cher*. Wipe the blood off my face."

Ripping off the bottom end of her T-shirt, she cleared the mess of it away from his eyes before doing the rest of his face. "You ever had to grow back a limb?"

Cool shadows in the moss green. "Ask me when we're alone." His eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror for a second. "I would've thought you'd be one of Nazarach's favorites, Monique. He likes beauty."

Monique shivered, wrapping her arms more firmly around herself in spite of the warm ambient temperature. "He likes pain more. I hope to God he never takes me to his bed."

"He hasn't already?" Janvier made no attempt to hide his surprise.

A thready laugh from the vampire in the backseat. "He says I need time to mature, to learn how to take the 'pleasure' he offers."

"Shit," Ashwini muttered. "Now she's making me feel sorry for her."

"Don't," Janvier said. "She made her choice. Now she's trying to manipulate you."

"Of course she is." Ashwini smiled at the look he shot her. "Monique here is hoping I'll stand up for her against Nazarach, which'll likely get me killed and take the spotlight off her."

A chill silence from the back. Then, "You're smarter than you look, Guild Hunter."

"Gee, thanks." Snorting, she rotated her shoulders to resettle her bones. "They teach us well at Guild Academy. Know what one of the first rules of hunting is?"

"Enlighten me." Ice dripped off the words.

"Never, ever, feel sorry for a vampire. They'll take that pity and use it to rip out your throat, smiling all the while."

"I was as human as you a year ago," Monique said.

"The operative word is 'was.'" She took out her cell phone. "Now you've been Made, and now you're what Nazarach Made you."

The angel was pleased to hear that his *pet* had been retrieved. "Bring her here, Guild Hunter. We have matters to discuss . . . and I'm sure she's most anxious to reunite with her family."

Ashwini recognized Antoine Beaumont and Simone Deschanel from their photos. Yet in none of the images she'd seen had their faces been sheened with a slick coating of pure, animal terror. Antoine hid it well, but his entire being was focused on the angel who stood so

relaxed at the windows opposite the royal blue sofa where the other two sat. Simone, fragrant and sexy in a bright red dress, wasn't as good at hiding her emotions. Her hands twisted over and over in her lap, while her eyes tracked Nazarach's every tiny movement.

When Ashwini and Janvier walked in with Monique—having made one very quick pit stop to buy her a pair of jeans and a T-shirt—Antoine's eyes jerked toward his many-times-removed granddaughter, but Simone continued to keep her gaze on the most dangerous predator in the room.

"Monique," Nazarach said in a gentle voice that wrapped around Ashwini's throat like a noose. "Come here, my sweet."

The golden-haired vampire walked toward her master on halting feet. "Sire, I didn't choose to break my Contract. Please believe me."

"Hmm." His eyes lifted up. "What say you, hunter?"

Ashwini forced herself to speak through the tightness in her throat. "I've done my task. My job ends with her return."

"So politic." Putting a hand on Monique's head as she went to her knees in front of him, Nazarach smiled. "It matters little. I will have my answers. And you'll stay for the banquet of course."

"I need to return to my duties at the Guild."

Amber eyes held her frozen. "That was not an invitation, Guild Hunter."

Chapter Seven

"He has no right to keep me here," Ashwini muttered as she sat brushing her drying hair while Janvier examined his face in the mirror. Having showered and cleaned up, he looked even more gaunt than he had in the car, his cheekbones vicious blades against his skin. "How much blood do you need?"

"Enough that it'll have to be direct from the vein this time. Stronger, richer, more nourishing."

Her hand tightened on the handle of the brush. "Audrina?"

"If she offers." A fluid shrug. "Would you ever offer, *cher*?"

"If you were dying in front of me, yeah."

A small smile, his lips thin with strain. "You surprise me again. But no, I want no blood from you—not until we're both sweaty and naked and you're screaming my name."

Her mind formed the image far too easily, a hot, tangled thing that made inner muscles tighten in damp readiness. "Confident of yourself, aren't you?"

"I simply know what I want." Those bayou-born eyes took inventory of her from head to toe, with several lingering stops in between. "And as I said, there's pleasure in a bite."

She wondered if she could crave his touch any more than she did now. "It's a temporary high." A temporary madness.

"Not at orgasm," he murmured. "Then, it makes the pleasure multiply and grow and grow until takes over your entire self."

Body starting to rebel against her control, she pointed the brush at him. "Go, feed. I need you healthy if we're going to survive this banquet."

"You trust me to come to your aid?"

"No. I just want to be able to use you as a shield— right now you're barely wide enough to hide half of me." And yet, in spite of it all, he was starkly handsome. As if he'd been stripped down to his very essentials.

"You are right." Straightening, he headed toward the door. "When I return, we'll talk. Nazarach's banquets have a way of turning deadly without warning."

Janvier's words tumbled around and around in her head as Ashwini walked through the doors to the banquet room, the long table piled high with foodstuffs and bottles that gleamed dark red. Food and blood.

And flesh.

Monique kneeled demurely at Nazarach's side as the angel sat in

the chair at the head of the table, talking to Antoine. The former hostage, her hair a sheet of beaten gold, was dressed in an elegant dress that screamed couture. The vivid crimson fabric managed to cover her torso and leave the rest of her bare, while skirting away from appearing trashy.

Monique wasn't the only one on display. Simone sat to Antoine's left and she, too, was dressed like an invitation. In fact, all the female vampires around the table were clothed in a similar high-class, high-sex style except for T-shirt-clad Perida, who sat next to Callan. The enforcer's gaze was pure molten fury as she spied Ashwini.

But Ashwini was more concerned about the fact that Nazarach had invited both factions—either he'd decided to end the standoff . . . or he was planning to play the most lethal of games.

The angel looked up at that moment, amber eyes filled with such screams that she wondered how he could sleep. "Guild Hunter." He waved her toward a seat midpoint on the table. Janvier already sat on the opposite side, having been summoned earlier.

The tightness in her chest relaxed at seeing him unharmed. As she took her seat, she realized Nazarach had put her and Janvier right in the middle—to better hear and spread the word of his decisions, his cruelties? It was, she was forced to admit, an efficient method of getting the message across. No need to kill hundreds. Do one viciously enough and no one would dare rise up against you again.

The man next to Ashwini waited until Nazarach's attention was elsewhere before speaking. "Bringing my sister back was the worst move you've ever made."

Looking into that electric blue gaze, that perfect skin, she raised her eyebrows. "Is that a threat?"

"Of course not." Frédéric Beaumont's eyes were glacial when they met hers. "I'd never threaten a hunter Nazarach holds in favor."

"Smart guy." And he'd rip out her throat the instant he thought he could get away with it. That didn't mean she couldn't use him. "You're into weapons, I hear."

To his credit, Frédéric followed the abrupt shift in topic with ease. "Yes."

"Do you know where I could get some handheld grenade launchers?"

A slight pause. "May I ask why you need them?"

"Just thinking they might come in useful one day." The dreams had been odd, fragmented. All she could really remember was thinking that grenade launchers sure would've come in handy. And given her dreams . . . "I like to be prepared."

"I may have the name of a supplier for you." Frédéric continued to stare at her. "You're slightly out of step with the world, aren't you,

hunter?"

"Or the world's out of step with me," she said as Janvier caught her eye.

Warning blazed in the green depths she was used to seeing filled with laughter, and the strength of it chilled her to the soul. Whatever the hell Nazarach had planned, Ashwini really didn't want to be here for it. Briefly, she considered calling in the Guild pullout, but why put Kenji and Baden in danger if Nazarach only wanted her and Janvier as his audience?

A sudden pure silence.

Ashwini knew things had begun even before she turned to see Nazarach raising a wineglass. "To intelligent conversation and new beginnings."

It took her a few seconds to figure out why those words drenched the room in fear. Antoine and Callan sat opposite each other, the old guard and the new. Only one, she thought, was meant to come out of this alive. "Survival of the fittest," she muttered to herself.

But Frédéric answered. "Not always." Leaning close, he brushed her shoulder with his. "Sometimes, it's survival of those who can play the game best."

She turned to him. "Your sister will get herself killed unless she learns."

Full lips curved. "Monique is very good at making men do what she wants."

"Yes, but Nazarach isn't a man. And I think she might forget that one day."

Two slow blinks. "She won't die. Not tonight. Nazarach will humiliate her into submission and that will be enough."

Ashwini heard an undercurrent of anger in his voice, and it was understandable, but there was something else, something that made her hidden senses recoil. Following his sensual gaze as it stroked over the bare curve of Monique's shoulder, she shook her head. "Please tell me what I'm thinking is wrong."

"Everyone else will die," Frédéric whispered, his refined voice sandpaper against her skin. "It's better to choose companions from those who'll remain for eternity."

Putting down her water glass, she swallowed her gorge. "That's a unique way of thinking."

"Far better than Janvier's." Frédéric looked across the table, and the two men locked eyes. "He pursues you, but you'll turn to dust in mere decades if not sooner. Such a relationship is pointless."

Tracing Janvier's profile—healthy and unblemished once more—she shook her head. "There's pleasure in the dance, pleasure you'll never know." Because she understood without asking that Monique

and Frédéric had been in this unhealthy relationship since long before they were Made.

Frédéric continued to hold Janvier's gaze. "Whatever pleasure there is, the pain will agonize him far longer."

"And if Nazarach decides Monique is expendable?" she whispered.

His head snapped toward her, and there was a madness in those formerly urbane eyes that made her fear for the kind of vampire he'd become with age. "I'll destroy anyone who tries to take her from me."

Ashwini didn't answer, but she had the thought that Frédéric Beaumont wasn't going to have a very long life, either. In fact, she, with her pitiful human life span, might outlive this almost-immortal. Because no one could stand against an angel of Nazarach's power except one of the Cadre of Ten—and if Frédéric didn't understand that . . .

Icy fingers of fear crawled up her spine as Nazarach stood, flaring out his wings until they dominated the room, all shimmering amber and terrible beauty. That fear, it was healthy. She held it to her, a shield against the impact of the power coming off him. For the first time, she *truly* saw him, truly understood how very inhuman he was, how completely removed from mortal life.

This being saw them all—vampire and human—as nothing more than interesting, amusing, or irritating toys, depending on his mood.

"I have no quarrel," the angel began, his voice quiet . . . and as cutting as an unsheathed blade, "with my vampires sorting out their problems amongst themselves. However, when you take it to this level, you bring my control of you into question." His gaze went to Antoine, then Simone. They stayed on the terrified female for several long seconds. "Of course," he said softly, "some of you apparently believe you can do a better job than an angel who has lived seven hundred years. Is that not so, Simone?"

Simone's fingers were trembling so hard, the red liquid in her wineglass sloshed over the edge as she put it down on the table. "Sire, I would never—"

"Lying," Nazarach interrupted, "is something I despise."

"Sire," Antoine said, putting a protective hand over his mate's, "I'll take responsibility for any missteps. I'm the older party."

Nazarach's amber eyes glowed as he looked at the vampire. "Noble as always, Antoine. She would sell you to the highest bidder, if it came down to it."

Antoine gave a faint smile. "We all have our foibles."

Nazarach laughed and there might've been a glimmer of amusement in it—but it was the amusement of an immortal, a knife that made others bleed. "I'm pleased Callan didn't manage to kill you,

Beaumont." Turning, he looked at the man he'd just mentioned. "The young lion—one not very good at guarding what you aim to keep." His hand stroked over Monique's hair again, a silent, merciless taunt.

Callan's eyes cut to Janvier. "I trusted too easily. I won't make that mistake again."

"That mistake," Janvier corrected with shrugging insouciance, "saved your life."

Nazarach's expression didn't change, but his voice, it held a layer of white frost. "The Cajun is right. You took that which was mine. Why shouldn't I rip your bones from your skin while you stand screaming?"

Callan stood, then fell to one knee. "My deepest apologies, sire. I was . . . overzealous in my attempt to prove to you that I can bear you better service than those who take their position for granted."

For a moment, there was no sound, and Ashwini knew it was the instant of judgment. When Nazarach's wings snapped back to lie sleek against his spine, no one dared draw breath.

"Simone," he said in that soft, dangerous voice. "Come here."

The slender woman got up, trembling so hard she could barely walk. Antoine rose with her. "Sire," he began.

Nazarach shook his head in a sharp negative. "Only Simone." When it appeared as if Antoine might open his mouth, the angel said, "I'm not that indulgent, Antoine, even for you."

Clearly reluctant, Antoine retook his seat. And that, Ashwini thought, was the price of immortality. Giving up part of your soul. She watched as Simone reached the angel, but before she could go down on her knees, Nazarach caught her by her upper arms and bent his head to her ear.

Whatever he said to her, no one would ever know. But when she turned back to the room, her face was a shock of white, her bones cutting against her skin. Nazarach's right hand remained on her shoulder as he met Antoine's eyes. "It seems Simone will be my guest for the next decade. She agrees she has some lessons to learn about dealing with angels."

Antoine's face grew tight, but he didn't interrupt.

"You will stay loyal to me, Antoine." A quiet order, a brutal warning, his fingers playing over Simone's pale, pale cheek. "Utterly loyal."

"Sire." Antoine bowed his head, looking away from the woman he called his own.

But Nazarach wasn't finished. "For what you've done, I'll spare your life, but not those of your children's children. There will be no more Beaumont vampires, not for another two hundred and fifty years."

Frédéric sucked in a breath and Ashwini didn't have to ask to know why. The vampire had just been told he couldn't have children unless he wished to watch them die. And since vampires weren't fertile for long after the transformation, that meant he'd never ever have a child.

Callan had remained unmoving all this time, but raised his head when Nazarach called his name.

"If you wish your kiss to remain in Atlanta, you'll sign another Contract. A century of service."

It appeared, on the surface, an almost easy punishment—after all, Callan sought to serve Nazarach anyway. But seeing the way Nazarach's hand moved on Monique's head, Ashwini knew very well that the angel understood there was something between the beautiful vampire and the leader of the Fox kiss. And he would use that knowledge to torment Callan whenever and however he felt like it.

There was no blood that night. Not any that could be seen. But as Ashwini watched Simone slide to her knees on Nazarach's other side, she understood that some wounds bled rivers of pain that stained both people and places. Simone's silent screams were already weaving themselves into the graceful arches of Nazarach's home.

Chapter Eight

Ashwini had never been more glad to get out of a place. Leaving at first light, she didn't draw a clear breath until the taxi was at least ten minutes from the plantation house.

"You sensed things in Nazarach's home," Janvier commented from beside her.

"Not just his home." If she'd had to touch Nazarach . . . . Her soul shrank from the horror. "Then there's Antoine. Even Simone. She's done some nasty things in her time."

"And still you feel sorry for her." Janvier sighed. "Why am I the only one you never feel sorry for?"

"Because you're a pain in the ass."

A masculine laugh as the taxi driver brought them to a stop at the train station. Paying him, she got out and grabbed her duffel as Janvier did the same with his. Callan had returned both early this morning, his eyes holding the promise of future retaliation.

"So," Janvier said as she found some cash to buy a ticket from the machine, "we are back to being adversaries?"

"I owe you a favor. I won't forget."

"Neither will I." Reaching forward as she took the ticket and turned, he cupped her cheek. "If I asked you to trust me, Ashwini, what would you say?"

"Words mean squat. It's the doing that counts." And because he'd bled for her, she raised her hand to his cheek, putting them in perfect harmony. "Thank you."

His expression shifted, becoming starkly intimate in the hush of the early-morning platform. "Stay with me. I'll show you things that'll make you laugh in delight, scream in passion, cry for the sheer joy of it."

He knew her, she thought. Knew her well enough to offer her the wildest of rides. "You've started the doing," she murmured, "but you've got a way to go."

"Who hurt you, *cher*?" A gentle question, and yet she saw the chill intent in his eyes.

Unsurprised he'd understood what she'd never told anyone, she shook her head. "No one you can kill."

A slow blink, lashes sweeping down to cover his eyes. When they swept back up, she expected to see the Cajun charmer again. But what met her was that same simmering darkness, that feeling he was ready to spill heart's blood. "Do you love him?"

"I did once," she answered honestly. "Now I feel nothing."

"Liar." His fingers moved on her skin, hot and real and mercifully

quiet. “If you felt nothing, you wouldn’t run so far and hard.”

Her spine went stiff, but she held his gaze as the train rolled into the station. “Maybe I run because I like it. The freedom, the excitement, why would I give that up?”

“Part of you is the wind,” he murmured. “*Oui*, that is true. But even the wind sometimes rests.”

Shaking her head, she slid her hand around the back of his neck, soaking in the intrinsically male heat of his skin. “Then consider me an endless storm.”

The Cajun kissed exactly as he looked—raw and earthy and lazy . . . in the best way. The patience of him made her toes curl with the knowledge that he’d kiss her as exquisitely in other, softer, darker places. Agile hands stroking over her back, he held her to him as he explored her as thoroughly as she explored him. Decadent, sharp, wild, the taste of Janvier filled her mouth.

And when she pulled away, he bit her lower lip. “Until next time, Guild Hunter.”

“I’ll be holding a crossbow next time.” It was a certainty, given Janvier’s penchant for pissing off high-level angels.

A slow, so slow smile. “You might be my perfect woman.”

“If I am, you’re in serious trouble.” She stepped back, and up into the train carriage, as the final warning tone sounded. “I don’t date vampires.”

“Who said anything about dating?” He gave her that wicked smile he seemed to save just for her. “I’m talking blood and sex and hunting.”

As the train pulled away, Ashwini knew she was in trouble. Because Janvier didn’t know her, he *knew* her. “Blood and sex and hunting.” It was one hell of a tempting proposition.

Fishing out her phone, she called the Guild Director. “Sara, I’ve changed my mind.”

“On?”

“The Cajun.”

“You sure?” Sara asked. “Last time you hunted him, you told me to keep you away from him or you’d end up in solitary confinement after throwing him into a lava pit.”

“Solitary confinement might be good for me.”

A pause. “Ash, you do realize you live in the Twilight Zone?”

The affection in the comment made her grin. “Normal is overrated. Just make sure I get any hunts where he’s involved.”

“You got it.” The Guild Director blew out a breath. “But I have to ask one thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you two *flirting*?”

Ashwini felt her lips curve. “If he’s not gator-bait by the next hunt . . . possibly.”

Nalini Singh is passionate about writing. Though she’s traveled as far afield as the deserts of China and the temples of Japan, it is the journey of the imagination that fascinates her most. She’s beyond delighted to be able to follow her dream as a writer.

Nalini lives and works in beautiful New Zealand. For contact details and to find out more about the Psy-Changeling and Guild Hunter series, please visit her website at www.nalinisingh.com.